

Evolution of the new theater on 26th Street

In **early 1953** local promoter James Dean, with others, proposed a grand **Manor Gate Shopping Center**, — a \$4.5 million dollar (\$54 million in today's dollars) shopping/business development on the south side of 26th Street at the railroad crossing. It would include offices, shopping, a bank and a **movie theater**. Across the street would be a new City Hall. This was to be the centerpiece of Wilton Manors new “downtown”.



By the **end of 1953**, what actually opened was a small, one-story strip shopping center consisting of *Williams City Drugs*, *Moore's Jewelry* and the office of Dean's *Florida Sun Life Insurance Company*. A second set of storefronts were added around **1956**, with the “anchors” being a 7-11 and *Downey's Donuts*. That same year a *second Dairy Queen* opened in an outbuilding on 26th Street.. A *Kentucky Fried Chicken* was added to the plaza around **1960**. With the addition of the KFC, Manor Gate became a gathering spot for local teens. This included “Chicken Hop” dance parties in the parking lot—with music by Fred Hamill's (a la Hamill Firestone) *Green Onions* band.

At the **end of 1964** ads announce “the new Manor Gates Shopping Center welcomes the addition of an A&P Supermarket”. [The A&P closed in **1975** and became *Westland Meats*, then the *Texan Family Restaurant* in **1976**, the well-known *Old Florida Seafood House* in **1977**, *Holy Mackerel* in **2020**, and *Wilton Collective* in **2024**.]

It took 18 years to fulfill Dean's vision of a movie theater in the plaza. The grand opening of **Manor Cinema** was announced in May **1971**. It was dubbed a “second-run theater”, with 382 seats. Tickets were \$1.50 for adults and 75 cents for children. Popcorn was 15 cents and soda 10 cents. The first movie was Disney's “*Aristocats*”. By **1983** Manor Cinema had become “**Manor Art Cinema**” and was described as featuring films with “adult and sexual themes”. The date of its last screening is unclear.



1988 brings the first ad for “**Brian C. Smith's Off Broadway Theater on East 26th Street**” (yes, that was the name used in all of its ads). In **2001** the name was changed to “**Stage Door's 26th Street Theater**”. The last ad was in December **2007** for “*Sisters of Swing – the Life of the Andrews Sisters*”.

The venue remained dark until it was intermittently repurposed as “**Wilton Theater Auctions**” from approximately **2013 to 2015**.

It was abandoned and dark again for some ten years, until the recent announcement of the opening of WM's new multifunctional performance space, the **Gray Box Theater**.

*To view our mini-archive of the Manor Gate Shopping Center, including never-before-published vintage photos and business ads, go to <https://wmhistory.org>, then click the **RECENT ADDITIONS** dropdown menu to download.*